

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 8, 2006

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The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes the appointment by Secretary Michael Chertoff of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) first Senior Refugee and Asylum Policy Advisor. The appointment comes on the first anniversary of the release of USCIRF's congressionally-authorized study recommending the creation of such a position. The Commission urged Secretary Chertoff to establish such a post when it met with him on April 7, 2005.

"The appointment of a Senior Refugee and Asylum Policy Advisor marks an essential first step for the Department of Homeland Security to resolve the problems we identified and ensure that legitimate asylum seekers will be treated with dignity, fairness, and consistency," said USCIRF Chair Michael Cromartie. "Several of those problems persist because there has not been any senior official assigned to coordinate asylum policy among the three DHS bureaus entrusted with protecting asylum seekers. The Commission urges Secretary Chertoff to ensure that Mr. Igor Timofeyev -- the newly appointed Advisor -- will be given the necessary authority and resources to take decisive action on the other findings and recommendations of the Study."

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 authorized the Commission to appoint experts to study whether the Expedited Removal process is sufficiently protecting legitimate

asylum seekers. Congress asked for the Study to examine whether asylum seekers subject to Expedited Removal are being detained improperly or under inappropriate conditions and whether they are being returned to countries where they might face persecution.

The Study found that Expedited Removal - a process implemented in 1997 to "expeditiously remove" certain improperly documented aliens without a hearing - was intended by Congress to protect the integrity of our borders while also protecting *bona fide* asylum seekers. The Study, however, identified serious implementing flaws which place legitimate asylum seekers at risk of being returned to countries where they may face persecution. The Study also found that *bona fide* asylum seekers were almost certain to be detained inappropriately by DHS under jail-like conditions and in actual jails. In some facilities, asylum seekers slept alongside convicted criminals serving time or criminal aliens awaiting deportation.

The USCIRF *Report on Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal* is available at www.uscirf.gov

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael Cromartie
- Felice D. Gaer